

Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas B. Modly

The Hugh Hewitt Show

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Audio:

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Transcript:

HH: I'm pleased to welcome back to the program Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly. Good morning, Secretary Modly, welcome back. Good to have you.

TM: Good morning, Hugh. How are you?

HH: Good. I'm not sure I'm comfortable talking about a strategic asset, but it's in the headlines, so some questions about the Teddy Roosevelt. And if it's an inappropriate question, just say so.

TM: Okay.

HH: Should we be discussing carriers and, at sea and their readiness at all?

TM: I would prefer that we don't do that in public forums, clearly. That's part of the rationale behind why I took the action that I did yesterday.

When, you know, it's been a long time since I was in the Navy on active duty, but one of the first things I learned as a midshipman was this phrase that I think became popular in World War II, which is loose lips sink ships. You know, maybe we need to update that now for the digital era, but I think the message is pretty clear. We have to be careful with the information we share and how we share it. It's certainly not a reason for us not to share information through proper chains of command and to be transparent about challenges that we're facing, particularly in crises. But that's not what happened in this instance. And that's the reason why I took the actions that I did yesterday.

HH: Now Secretary Modly, since the Teddy Roosevelt is on the front page of every newspaper, I'm going to break my rule and ask you a few questions. First, it's berthed in Guam. Could it surge to sea if needed?

TM: Yes.

HH: Are any of the sailors on the TR in bad shape? The press coverage and the letter giving rise to the action yesterday seemed to suggest there might be some sailors in bad shape.

TM: Well, let me give you the latest numbers that I have. And I've been very transparent about this since this first broke last week. I've had at least three press conferences discussing these, so as of right now, we have about 95 people, about 140 people that have tested positive. 95 of

those are symptomatic, and those symptoms are largely mild to moderate flu-like symptoms. 42 of those are asymptomatic. Not one person has been hospitalized, not one person in ICU, and not one person on a ventilator.

HH: So you referred to it. You relieved the CO of the TR yesterday. Why did you do that? What were your reasons for doing so?

TM: Well, my reasons, I laid out pretty clearly in my press conference yesterday and in the statement. But it basically came down to the point that I just made earlier, which is I had just lost confidence in this particular commanding officer's ability to manage through this crisis based on the actions he displayed last week. And without going into too many details on it, because I have detailed that in my statement yesterday, I just lost confidence in his ability. And I think his actions put the crew at risk, greater risk. I think he put the spotlight on the Navy in a negative light when all the things he was asking for we're surging for him. And also, I think sort of most disappointing to me is that I had set up a direct line to him that if he felt that anything, way before his letter was written, that if he felt anything wasn't going well and he needed help, that he could reach out to me directly. And he did not do that. And so for that reason, I just think maybe in the midst of the crisis, you know, sometimes this happens. People get overwhelmed. And I just can't have a commanding officer who gets overwhelmed and uses that type of judgment in the middle of a crisis. And this is not an indictment of his

entire career. He's had an absolutely incredible career. I'm envious of it. He's done some amazing things. But at this particular time, I needed a CO there that could help manage us through this crisis. And I just didn't think based on those actions that I could do that.

HH: Now there's a lot of conversation in the media about chain of command, Secretary Modly. And for the Steelers fans out there, they think that's the 10 yard line marker. What is the chain of command, and what happened to it here?

TM: Well, every commanding officer has a chain of command that precedes above him. This particular commanding officer's chain of command, the first step on that was the carrier strike group commander who is a rear admiral who's actually embarked on the ship with him, and probably is berthed, you know, 10 or 20 feet down the passageway from him. He instead of going to that particular admiral's cabin and sitting down and talking with him about his concerns and coming up with a strategy with him on how to address them, he decided to send an email and copy that email to a large list of other people who were not in the chain of command, and sent it up also through the chain of command skipping people in the chain of command. And that, to me, just represented just extremely poor judgment, because once you do that in this digital era, you know that there is no way that you can control where that information's going to go. And so what happened, very, very predictably, and should have been predictable to him, is that the media

picked up on it. And of course, they published it, which you know, is their responsibility to do, I assume. And then we're scrambling around to try and understand whether or not what he's saying in this statement is true, whether or not the Navy is actually doing what it's supposed to be doing when he knew full well at the time that everything he had been asking for was flowing into theater as fast as possible. And it just undermined our efforts. And I think also, unfortunately, it put a lot of families, created a lot of distress for the families. He did not even talk to his command master chief about this, so the enlisted people on the ship were not aware of what his feelings were on the state of the ship. And it just was extremely bad judgment. And I'm not saying that in the next instance where he has some type of high risk crisis that he's having to deal with that he would react as poorly as he did there, but I couldn't afford to take that risk at this particular time. And so that's why he's being reassigned.

HH: Secretary Modly, removing a commander in the field is difficult. General Mattis relieved a colonel on the march to Baghdad on April 4th, 2003, and he wrote about how hard that was. How difficult a decision was this for you?

TM: Hugh, this was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, particularly in this job, because I know that in my heart and in the heart and mind of this particular officer, every single thing that he was doing was with the best interests of the crew in mind, for their lives and their safety. I know that he loves this crew. I know that the crew loves and respects him. But

that's not an excuse for exercising the judgment that he did. So it was very, very difficult for me. I had wished that I would never have to make a decision like this, but my responsibilities extend beyond just that individual officer. And they go to the safety of that crew, our national security objectives, all the other ships that are out there in the Pacific that are now perhaps on higher standard of alert because our adversaries in the region think that one of our warships might be crippled, which it's not. But that sows seeds of doubt. I mean, as I said, loose lips sink ships, and that's what happens. And this officer should have known better.

HH: Have you named a new commanding officer?

TM: Yes, we have. And he is tracking to get there. Currently, the XO is, he's taken command of the ship for now. The strike group commander is still there. And the new CO is on his way and should be soon. And actually...

HH: Can you tell us his or her name?

TM: Yes. His name is Rear Admiral Carlos Sardiello. He is a rear admiral select. He actually was the prior commanding officer of the TR, which is really the best possible person we could have found. And I appreciate him stepping into the line here. But it's important that he understands that crew. Many of the crew were there when he was there before. He

understands that power plant, and he understands the ship, how it operates. He knows every nook and cranny on that ship. And he obviously, having served as the CO, also has a great love for it and the crew, and that's what we need there right now.

HH: Now based on Robert Kaplan's very fine book, *Asia's Cauldron*, and my own visit there last year, I thought it was very important for the TR to put in Da Nang, into Da Nang. I've read reports the Navy does not believe the virus originated there. What is your assessment of whether or not it ought to have gone in, who made the decision to go in, and whether or not it impacted the crew's vulnerability to the virus.

TM: Well, when these ships get chopped to the combat and command, so it was assigned to IndoPaCom, and Admiral Davidson is the commanding admiral for the IndoPaCom region. It's his call as to how that ship will be used. It's our job to make sure that that ship is ready so he can use it as he needs to use it. Now once it goes under his operational command, it's his responsibility to make sure that, to assign that ship to where it goes. It's a very important strategic signal, obviously, that that ship went into Da Nang. It's the second one we've sent to Vietnam since the Vietnam War, all within the last couple years. And it's very encouraging to know that the Vietnamese government wants us to come there and show, demonstrate some presence there. When the ship was sent there, the risk assessment was pretty low. There was only, I believe, 16-20 cases in all of Vietnam, confirmed cases, and

they were all in the Hanoi area, not down near Da Nang. But that being said, we have not done the forensics, and probably will never be able to do the forensics on who is case zero on the ship. I mean, we have people, 5,000 people on that ship, you know, 4,800. They're flying in and out from all over the place. You know, this could have been contracted by a crew member who was in San Diego on leave before he arrived on the ship. We just don't know. At this stage, I don't, I'm not sure I really care or that that matters. It's all about getting the crew healthy and getting them off the ship as expeditiously as possible and maintaining a watch bill there that can deploy the ship if it needs to deploy, and that's exactly what we're doing right now. And there have been some amazing strides in the last week. The ship pulled in last week. We really didn't have a lot of places to put these guys and women, but within a week, we're up to about 3,700 different places that we're rolling people off to where they can stay and be in quarantine in some level of comfort while we go through the testing protocols and ensure that we have a crew on the ship that can operate all the things that need to be operated and safeguarded.

HH: Technical question, Secretary Modly, if the pilots who are the heart and soul of the carrier lose their qualifications to land in daytime or nighttime, will they regain them in Guam? And will the ship's tour be extended once they regain their quals if in fact they lose them?



TM: Oh, they're, they'll hold onto their quals for quite a while. It's well, I think it's something, I asked that question the other day. It's well over 30 days before they would lose their quals. And so I think we're going to be through this by then in terms of being able to sustain that. But they're working all kinds of contingencies to figure out okay, if this thing extends longer than that, what do we do? And you know, obviously, we're thinking through that not just there, but across the whole fleet.

HH: I'm curious, once this has passed over the ship, it becomes somewhat immune to the virus and therefore an even more valuable strategic asset. Do you expect the TR's tour to be extended?

TM: I don't know that, and I really probably wouldn't be able to comment on that publicly. So I'm sorry, I can't give you an answer on that one.

HH: Okay, how is the Navy monitoring COVID across the fleet?

TM: Well, we're monitoring it very, very actively. And we're, I'm getting updates every day. I've got not just within the Navy, but across the DOD, we have conference calls at least two or three times a day talking about what's happening across the DOD, the actions that we're taking. As you know, last week we delivered the Mercy and the Comfort to New York City and to Los Angeles. We're looking at that. We're evaluating that. I went out and visited the Mercy on Tuesday to see how they were doing. They're, you know, they're doing magnificently well. We're looking at

possibilities to expand the amount of coverage we do there in terms of helping out with some of the patients that are there, perhaps looking at taking patients who are recuperating from the virus and bringing them on board just to be a bigger relief valve for the local hospitals and local authorities there. But the Navy is really, I mean, it's astounding. The Navy, I tell these people all the time that wherever, whoever will listen to me that we had over 200 volunteers that wanted to go on those ships to go right into the heart of this virus to serve their country.

HH: I'm sure you do. But Mr. Secretary, you've got carriers and Ohio class submarines, our strategic assets of the United States. I expect the curtain to come down over them now in a way that people just have forgotten you need to protect strategic assets. How are the families going to hear what's going on, because families, families, families. I know you care about them. How are they going to get information?

TM: Well, you know, we've got a pretty active ombudsman at work that keeps the families informed. And we also work with, through our command master chief petty officers to keep them informed as well. And you know, we're moving into some uncharted territory with respect to this. And you know, we have to be careful. And that's sort of at the heart of, you know, the challenge we had with the TR. I mean, this is not normal circumstances. You know, we may not be at war in a traditional sense, but we are in a major crisis both globally with this pandemic, but also with respect to authoritarian regimes who want to take us down,

and they're actively trying to do that. And so we have to be on guard and on alert.

HH: 30 seconds, Mr. Secretary, all eyes are on the PRC. I assume the fleet is as well on a heightened state of alert after the helicopter-Japanese destroyer incident?

TM: We're always on a very high alert, particularly in that part of the world with respect to what the PRC is doing, and the things they have been doing over the last many years. So obviously, it's a big concern for us, and that sort of heightens the, heightens the sort of sensitivity that we all had to the situation on the TR.

HH: Acting Secretary Thomas Modly, thank you. Keep coming back. I appreciate your candor and your transparency, your availability as well at a very difficult time. Thank you, sir.

TM: Thanks, Hugh.

End of interview.